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James Neiss/Niagara Gazette

CONFERENCE: Niagara University's Center for the Study and Stabilization of Black Families opened its 11th annual conference Wednesday at the Buffalo Hilton. Bertha Terry, right, gets some information from LINKS volunteer Carrie Mitchel, seated, and Freida Pippens, office manager with the center.

NU center conducts conference

DISCUSSION: *New state agency to be examined during three-day event.*

By Autumn D. Parker

Niagara Gazette

BUFFALO — The 11th annual conference of Niagara University's Center for the Study and Stabilization of Black Families will examine a new state agency, the Office of Children and Family Services, this week.

The agency, which will oversee the proposed statewide "advantage schools," is expected to have a major impact on families, according to Dr. James Williams, conference coordinator. The conference, "Reclaiming Our Families in New York State," began Wednesday and runs through Friday at the Buffalo Hilton.

"Advantage schools" would keep public schools open until 7 p.m. The extended hours would be used for remedial studies, computer training, sports and other enrichment activities.

The conference will feature three keynote speakers and more than 20

workshops on issues relating to children and families. John A. Johnson, commissioner of the office of Children and Family Services, will chair and speak at the conference.

Rosalie Wiggle, director of support services for Buffalo city schools, will present a program for teen-age mothers.

"The program is under proposal at this point with the Board of Education," Wiggle said. "It will include a separate high school that would remain available to the community until 7 p.m., and community agencies.

"Most importantly, it will have a day care center. We will have programs that will stress the importance of interaction between mother and infant up to age 3," she said. "It's just one of the ways the community and the Office of Children are coming together with the school districts."

Williams said the annual conference is "extremely different this year, because for the first time, we are being sponsored by two organizations."

"The government and state

Legislature made a decision to consolidate two departments (the state Division for Youth and the state Department of Social Services) into one," he said. "There was the sentiment that we needed to be more proactive with our approach.

"We are looking toward preventative work, so it was absolutely necessary to combine the two departments — there is now a tremendous amount of resources."

The goal of the workshops is to develop the skills of child care professionals, child advocates and professionals, educators, policy makers and parents who are actively involved in their children's lives.

Daniel W. O'Brien, director of corporate and conference services, a division of the lifelong learning department of NU, said, "The goal of our office is to provide support to the Black Family Center when planning conferences."

O'Brien has worked closely with the center and Dr. Williams on the conference.

"I think it's great," O'Brien said. "It's an area that needs attention."